



## How is the Federal Government Organized with Respect to Influencing Child Hunger?

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## **Introduction and Background**

### **What is the Role of Government in Addressing Child Hunger?**

Hubert Humphrey once said: “the moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, disabled and the handicapped”. This viewpoint captures how Congress and the Executive Branch of government (with a few notable exceptions) have viewed their role in addressing child hunger through the latter part of the 20th and early 21st century.

America has a rich and bipartisan tradition of addressing the needs of its poor and hungry people. Perhaps President Nixon captured the essence of the paradox of hunger existing in a nation of great wealth and compassion when he said: “We don’t know just how many Americans are actually hungry and how many suffer from malnutrition, who eats enough and who doesn’t eat the right things. But we know that there are too many Americans in both categories. We can argue the extent of hunger. But hunger exists. We can argue its severity, but malnutrition exists! The plain fact is that a great many Americans are not eating well enough to sustain health” (1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health).

The 1969 White House Conference was a major factor in the creation of the Women, Infants and Children nutrition and health legislation (WIC Program). It also was the reason why Congress ultimately removed the “purchase requirement” in the Food Stamp Program. Prior to 1977, low-income participants in the Food Stamp Program were required to pay cash up front for food stamps. As a result, 15 million of the 30 million people eligible for the program were unable to participate since they had insufficient cash reserves to purchase food stamps.

Historic events, including citizen action, led to the convening of the White House Conference. The 1968 CBS documentary, “Hunger in America,” was a significant wakeup call about the nature and extent of poverty and hunger in the US. In 1967, the Field Foundation sponsored a Physicians Hunger Tour of rural southern states and found widespread cases of malnutrition. A 1968 report from a Citizen Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition led to the Poor People’s March on Washington, DC the same year.

The difference today in April 2011 is that we actually know approximately how many people are hungry, who they are, and where they live. The question remains: what are the Congress and the Executive Branch of government going to do about ending the condition of childhood hunger?

### **How Many People in the United States Experience Hunger?**

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the lead federal agency charged with ending childhood hunger by 2015. It is the government agency that tracks, studies, and

recommends strategies to address hunger and its impact on the US population. Most families in America live in households that have consistent, reliable access to enough food for active healthy living. USDA considers such households as “food secure”. Anti-hunger advocates prefer to classify households where access to adequate food is limited by lack of money and other resources as hungry, whereas USDA classifies such households as “food insecure”. In any case, USDA monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity (meaning that in such households there are people that are hungry or at risk of hunger at some point during the year) through an annual, nationally representative survey carried out by the US Census Bureau. Respondents answer a battery of questions about the availability of food in their households throughout the year. USDA then issues a report on households’ food security, food expenditures and use of food and nutrition assistance programs. According to USDA’s most recent report, a record high of 50 million Americans experienced food insecurity in 2009. This number included 17 million children. This means that nearly 1 in 4 children in the US was at risk of hunger in 2009. Since we know that there is a substantial relationship between nutrition and learning, a finding that 17 million children are at risk of hunger is an alarming number. What is the federal government’s plan to address childhood hunger?

### **The Obama Administration’s Pledge to End Childhood Hunger by 2015**

During the 2008 campaign, then candidate Barack Obama pledged to end childhood hunger by 2015. How is the Administration organized to achieve this noble goal and what steps have been taken to implement the Administration plan to end childhood hunger? The first step that any President takes to achieve any presidential initiative is to select his management team. President Obama nominated and the Senate confirmed Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa, as Secretary of Agriculture. As a member of the cabinet, Secretary Vilsack is the top political appointee responsible for implementing the administration’s policy on hunger and nutrition. The strategy that the Secretary has selected to end childhood hunger, while also improving child health, is to expand access to and the nutritional quality of federal nutrition programs to all who are eligible. Secretary Vilsack has taken this assignment from the President very seriously. He has taken a leadership role on hunger and nutrition issues by testifying before Congress, making presentations at major nutrition and anti-hunger conferences, and meeting with the leadership of these groups. He is also using his “bully pulpit” role with the national media to get informative pieces aired on nutrition and hunger issues. The second key member of the management team is Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS) Kevin Concannon. The Under Secretary’s Office is the first stop for any public or private sector activist or lobbyist interested in influencing federal nutrition program policy. Under Secretary Concannon is one of the most highly regarded political appointees in recent memory. He has held senior management positions in Maine, Oregon, and Iowa in state government. He is a good listener and savvy administrator who uses humor to dispel tension at every possible moment. These qualities and the fact that Secretary Vilsack is likely to act positively on the Under Secretary’s recommendation, makes Kevin Concannon the “man to see”.

Ordinarily, the Office of the Administrator at the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) at USDA is not closely tied to the development of policy. However, since Julie Paradis had such a rich background on hunger and nutrition policy issues in Congress and at Feeding America, she played a significant role in advising Under Secretary Concannon on key policy initiatives and legislative strategy decisions. Audrey Rowe replaced Ms. Paradis as Administrator at the FNS on April 1, 2011. She also has a long and well thought of career in SNAP and anti-hunger work, so it is likely that she will also be a key player in the policy arena at FNS.

There are many distinct subdivisions within USDA that Secretary Vilsack and Under Secretary Concannon will look to and rely upon in developing and implementing policy solutions regarding child hunger. Some of the key subdivisions include:

#### **Office of Research and Analysis (ORA)**

This office conducts program analysis and assessments of federal nutrition assistance programs that inform policy making and management of these programs. For example, the research skills of staff at ORA and the ERS (Economic Research Service) would be called upon by the Secretary if he wanted to know what the nutritional impact would be on SNAP households if SNAP benefits were increased by \$80 a month.

#### **Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Initiatives**

This office at USDA (and other federal agencies) was created by executive order by President George W. Bush. President Obama supports its mission and has continued its operation. It is recognition that faith-based groups are vital partners in the fight against hunger and poverty. The current focus of this office is working with faith-based leaders in the Hispanic community on increasing participation in the underutilized Summer Food Program for Children. The office also works with staff at the Corporation for National Service on community based hunger initiatives.

#### **Office of Strategic Initiatives, Partnerships and Outreach**

This office seeks public and private sector partnerships with the goal of linking local officials and governments to nonprofit and faith-based groups and state agencies as a strategy for increasing enrollment in SNAP and the Summer Food Program. This office formed and operates the SNAP Outreach Advisory Committee. The members come from anti-hunger organizations and major private sector companies. Extensive and high quality SNAP outreach materials and media buys have made a remarkable impact on the goal of increasing participation in the underutilized SNAP program. This office also is the lead agency on the selection and distribution of the \$5 million Hunger Free Community Grants.

Ultimately, USDA must respond and interact with two other major players in the Administration, namely the White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

## **White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC)**

DPC coordinates the domestic policymaking process in the White House and offers advice to the President. The DPC also supervises the execution of domestic policy throughout the Administration and represents the President's priorities to Congress. Melody Barnes is the Director of the DPC and serves as a senior adviser to the President, a position she held in the Obama presidential campaign. But on nutrition issues, the key staff people are Martha Coven and Sam Kass. Prior to joining the Administration, Ms Coven was a budget analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and a frequent trainer on budget issues for the Congressional Hunger Center's (CHC) Emerson National Hunger Fellowships. Sam Kass is the Assistant White House Chef and Food Initiative Coordinator. Mr. Kass gave the commencement address to the 16th class of Emerson Fellows in 2010. All major USDA policy initiatives must be approved by DPC and on nutrition policy issues the road begins and usually ends with Ms. Coven and Mr. Kass.

## **Office of Management and Budget**

OMB has control over all budget decisions for all federal agencies including USDA. Jack Lew, as head of OMB, has final decision-making authority on what proposals are contained in the President's Budget Request to Congress. Decisions on policy issues in nutrition program assistance programs go through the office of Robert Gordon, Executive Associate Director, OMB. Previously he was policy director for the Kerry Presidential campaign and a senior Fellow at CAP (Center for American Progress). He has a background in income maintenance, education and labor programs.

## **How does this Government Structure Actually Work in Influencing Child Hunger?**

The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment ACT (ARRA) and the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) Act

### **ARRA**

On December 17, 2008, members of the National Anti Hunger Organizations (NAHO) met with the President's Transition Team on Agriculture regarding legislative recommendations for the Administration's "stimulus bill", which became ARRA. The President had made a pledge to end childhood hunger by 2015 and part of that pledge was to improve the ability of low-income families to purchase healthier foods. Among the active participants at this meeting were Feeding America, Food Research and Action Center, Share Our Strength, National Council of La Raza, and the Congressional Hunger Center. These groups and other NAHO members recommended an immediate \$20 billion increase in SNAP benefits. Such an increase would provide an average household with an approximately \$80 in additional income each month that households could use to purchase more and better foods for their families. Staff from the White House DPC and OMB was present at the meeting.

Staff from the Secretary's research facilities (ORA and ERS) was able to provide information on low-income households' need for additional income in order to meet the nutritional needs of their families. So, with the full support of the anti-hunger community, it was possible for USDA to make the case with the White House (through DPC) and OMB that a \$20 billion SNAP benefit increase should be included in the ARRA legislation and Congress agreed to fund it. The Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Initiatives and the Office of Strategic Initiatives, Partnerships and Outreach each were assigned important roles in implementing this part of ARRA.

## **2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR)**

ARRA was an initiative of the West Wing of the White House (the President's Office), while the 2010 CNR was a joint initiative with the East Wing of the White House, (the First Lady's Office). This legislation offered the President an opportunity to take a significant step in achieving his goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015 and improving children's nutrition. By seeking a legislative proposal that expanded access to underutilized child nutrition programs, the President could decrease hunger and improve the nutritional status of the nation's children at the same time. The First Lady's Office also saw this legislation as an opportunity to pursue several nutrition policy objectives including reducing childhood obesity. So, the First Lady's Let's Move Campaign became engaged in the 2010 CNR. The overall goal of Let's Move is to reduce childhood obesity. The pillars of the Let's Move Campaign are:

- empower parents and caregivers with the ability to provide healthy food options for their children at home.
- enhance the availability of healthy meals at school.
- improve access to healthy and affordable foods in communities.
- increase children's physical activity.

The 2010 CNR was a top priority of the Obama Administration, led by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Anti-hunger and nutrition policy advocates engaged in many meetings and interactions with senior USDA officials on legislative proposals on how to expand access to child nutrition programs to eligible, but non-participating children. Recommendations were also presented and discussed about ways to improve the quality of school and preschool meals. Senior USDA staff included Secretary Vilsack and his Special Assistant on Nutrition, David Lazarus; Under Secretary Concannon; and FNS Administrator, Julie Paradis. These meetings resulted in the President including \$1 billion in new funding for child nutrition in his FY 09 Budget Request to Congress for the Child Nutrition Reauthorization.

On March 12, 2009, members of NAHO (representing major anti-hunger organizations), the Child Nutrition Forum (representing children's rights groups), the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (representing nutrition policy groups), and the Food Policy Working Group (representing major religious denominations) met with Robert Gordon of OMB, Martha Coven of DPC, and senior USDA staff. These groups had requested the

President to include \$4 billion for the CNR in his budget, but were pleased that at least \$1 billion was actually in the President's budget. Anti-hunger groups wanted this funding to be used to provide additional meals for preschool children and after school programs and to expand access to school breakfast and summer food programs. Nutrition policy groups wanted funds to be used to increase the quality of school meals and to give the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to establish nutrition standards for foods available to children outside of the school meals program, e.g., through vending machines.

The Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Initiatives and the Office of Strategic Initiatives, Partnerships and Outreach were also actively engaged with anti-hunger and nutrition policy groups, and private sector companies in pursuing the 2010 CNR as a major Presidential initiative.

In the final bill, Congress provided less than one half of the funding proposed in the President's budget and part of the funds provided were actually taken from the SNAP program benefit increase in ARRA. Since funding was limited, proposals in the House version of CNR that included funding for major expansion of the Summer Food, School Breakfast and Child Care Food Programs were dropped. However, the final legislation did contain funding for after school suppers and several important non-cost improvements in the Summer Food and Child Care Food Programs. Also, the President's FY12 Budget request contains funding to replace the SNAP funds used to help finance the child nutrition bill. The 2010 CNR did increase the school meal reimbursement rate by 6 cents, but schools are required to improve the nutritional quality of meals provided to children with these new funds. Also, the Secretary of Agriculture will now have the authority to establish nutrition standards for competitive foods.

### **The Role Played by Governmental and Quasi Governmental Agencies in Influencing Child Hunger**

Government and quasi-governmental agencies are frequently called upon to give Congress and Executive Branch officials advice and guidance on federal nutrition policy. These agencies include the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), USDA's Office of Research and Analysis (ORA), and Economic Research Service (ERS), at the Library of Congress Congressional Research Service (CRS), General Accountability Office (GAO), and independent chartered entities such as the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM).

For example, the School Nutrition Association requested that Chairman Miller of the Education and Labor Committee seek a GAO report on the actual cost of a school meal, compared to the reimbursement schools receive from the federal government. CBO is the final arbiter of the cost of all legislative proposals. OMB prepared the budget estimates for President Obama's \$1 billion CNR legislation. ORA and ERS conduct research studies on nutrition program policy issues, e.g., how can more fruits, vegetables and whole grains be incorporated into school meals programs. CRS responds to research

requests from individual Congressional offices, e.g., what can be done to expand Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) systems at WIC Farmers Markets.

These agencies and their staffs had an enormous impact on what ended up in the final version of the 2010 CNR. They frequently are still present at the end of the long legislative process as active participants in the House/Senate conference committee meetings that decide all disputed issues that remain between the House and Senate passed bills.